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# THE EGO IDEAL AND THE IDEAL SELF

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This paper has been prompted by the need to resolve a number of practical problems which have arisen in the course of indexing psychoanalytic case material in the Hampstead Index. Faced with the need to classify observations relating to ideal formation in children, it has been found impossible to distinguish sharply between the operation of an "ego ideal" and the superego system, although a number of features which are commonly referred to as constituents of the ego ideal are not fully included within the concept of the superego. Accordingly, the model of superego functioning (Sandler, 1960; Sandler et al., 1962), and that of the representational world (Sandler and Rosenblatt, 1962), used as a theoretical basis for indexing superego material, have been extended in an attempt to take into account the different facets of the concept of the ego ideal as described at different times by Freud and in some of the subsequent psychoanalytic literature.

Briefly, the view has been taken that various elements of what might be referred to as the ego-ego ideal-superego system have to be considered both in isolation and in their interaction. In particu-

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lar, we have found it valuable to distinguish the notion of the ideal self from that of the ideal object, and to consider our clinical material from the point of view of the factors determining the content of the ideal self at any given time.

The term "ego ideal," first introduced by Freud in 1914, has undergone a number of subtle changes in meaning during the course of the development of psychoanalytic metapsychology. Since the publication of *The Ego and the Id* (1923b) the predominant usage of the term has been as a synonym for the superego, although in relatively recent years a number of attempts have been made to differentiate the ego ideal from the superego (e.g., Piers and Singer, 1953; A. Reich, 1954, 1960; Novey, 1955; Lampl-de Groot, 1962), to regard it either as a separate mental structure or as a descriptive term referring to some, but not all, of the functions of the superego. Most of the recent formulations have been concerned with the need to distinguish between the benevolent and critical aspects of the superego (cf. Schafer, 1960), or with the differences between the ontogenetic development of ideals on the one hand and the conscience on the other.

Much of the present ambiguity attached to the term (leading inevitably to a degree of theoretical confusion) derives from the different shades of meaning attached to it by Freud, and it is the purpose of this paper to examine some of these variations in meaning, beginning with Freud's own writings. At present "ego ideal" is an omnibus term, and it seems clear that a number of rather different concepts are subsumed under it. We cannot speak of the ego ideal without specifying the sense in which it is used. In order to attempt a theoretical clarification, the notion of the ego ideal will be examined in the final part of this paper from the point of view of previous Hampstead Index work on the superego (Sandler, 1960; Sandler et al., 1962) and the representational world (Sandler, 1962; Sandler and Rosenblatt, 1962).

#### FREUD'S VIEWS ON THE EGO IDEAL

Freud introduced the term "ego ideal" in his paper "On Narcissism" (1914). He pointed out that impulses undergo repression if they come into conflict with the individual's cultural and ethical ideas. The person recognizes these ideals as a standard for himself

and submits to their claims. "Repression . . . proceeds from the ego; we might say with greater precision that it proceeds from the self-respect of the ego." Freud goes on to say that such repression may occur before the objectionable ideas have entered consciousness. The individual "has set up an ideal in himself by which he measures his actual ego. . . . For the ego the formation of an ideal would be the conditioning factor of repression."

Freud saw here the development of the ideal as being in direct continuity with the original narcissistic state. "The subject's narcissism makes its appearance displaced on to this new ideal ego, which, like the infantile ego, finds itself possessed of every perfection that is of value. . . . What he projects before him as his ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal."

Freud specifically distinguishes in this paper between the ego ideal and the "special psychical agency which performs the task of seeing the narcissistic satisfaction from the ego ideal is ensured and which, with this end in view, constantly watches the actual ego and measures it by that ideal." (In an editorial note to this paper Strachey points out that the later concept of the superego evolved from a combination of this special agency and the ego ideal as described at this juncture.) Freud is quite clear here on the existence of a distinction between the "narcissistic ego ideal" and the "institution of conscience" which is basically "an embodiment, first of parental criticism, and subsequently of that of society." He also refers to the conscience as a "censoring agency."

In the *Introductory Lectures* (1916-17) Freud maintained the position he had taken in 1914. The ego ideal was seen as being created by man *for himself* "in the course of his development," and this is done "for the purpose of recovering thereby the self-satisfaction bound up with the primary infantile narcissism, which since those days has suffered so many shocks and mortification." Distinguished from the ego ideal we have the conscience. "We recognise in this self-criticising faculty the ego censorship."

The next reference to the ego ideal comes in 1921 in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* where Freud then states that the melancholias show us "the ego divided, fallen apart into two pieces, one of which rages against the second . . . the piece which

behaves so cruelly is not unknown to us. . . . It comprises the conscience, a critical agency within the ego, which even in normal times takes up a critical attitude towards the ego." However, Freud goes on to say:

On previous occasions we have been driven to the hypothesis that some such agency develops in our ego which may cut itself off from the rest of the ego and come into conflict with it. We have called it the "ego ideal," and by way of functions we have ascribed to it self-observation, the moral conscience, the censorship of dreams, and the chief influence in repression. We have said that it is the heir to the original narcissism in which the childish ego enjoyed self-sufficiency; it gradually gathers up from the influences of the environment the demands which that environment makes upon the ego and which the ego cannot always rise to; so that a man, when he cannot be satisfied with his ego itself, may nevertheless be able to find satisfaction in his ego ideal which has been differentiated out of the ego.

In a comment on this passage Freud refers to his papers "On Narcissism" (1914) and "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) for previous discussions of the "critical agency," and he gives the impression in the text (quoted above) of *Group Psychology* that the term "ego ideal" had been previously applied to the conscience. This is not in fact correct, for nowhere in "Mourning and Melancholia" does Freud refer to the ego ideal, and he specifically calls the "critical agency" the conscience. In "On Narcissism," moreover, the conscience was quite specifically distinguished from the ego ideal. It would appear that in *Group Psychology* Freud now condensed his two former concepts into one, extending the term "ego ideal" to cover the agency of conscience as well as the ideal *which the individual has set up for himself*. Although, no doubt influenced by his earlier consideration of melancholia, the ego ideal is seen as critical and punitive, it is still linked with the formulations in the paper "On Narcissism." For example, we read: "It is even obvious, in many forms of love choice, that the object serves as a substitute for some unattained ego ideal of our own. We love it on account of the perfections we have striven to reach for our own ego, and which we should now like to procure in this roundabout way as a means of satisfying our narcissism."

Two years later, in *The Ego and the Id* (1923b) Freud proposed his structural theory. The ego ideal is now referred to as the superego, and Freud remarks that the considerations which led to the assumption of a differentiation within the ego have been stated in the paper "On Narcissism" and in *Group Psychology*. But, as Strachey points out in his introduction to *The Ego and the Id*, the distinction between the ideal itself and the agency concerned with its enforcement has been dropped. We can also detect a greater stress being laid by Freud on the critical and punitive aspects of what was now the superego.

Few other references to the ego ideal occur in Freud's writings. In "Remarks on the Theory and Practice of Dream-Interpretation" (1923a), written just prior to *The Ego and the Id*, Freud stated that "we should keep firmly to the fact that the separation of the ego from an observing critical, punishing agency (an ego ideal) must be taken into account in the interpretation of dreams as well." Another, and rather significantly different use of the term came nine years later, in the *New Introductory Lectures* (1932), where Freud, for the first time since the introduction of the structural theory, seems to imply a distinction between the superego and the ego ideal. He states: "We have now to mention another important activity which is to be ascribed to the superego. It is also the vehicle of the ego ideal, by which the ego measures itself, towards which it strives and whose demands for ever-increasing affection it is always striving to fulfil. No doubt this ego ideal is a precipitation of the old idea of the parents, an expression of the admiration which the child felt for the perfection which it at that time ascribed to them." It is worth noting that this formulation of the ego ideal is not identical with that given in "On Narcissism." In 1924, in "The Economic Problem of Masochism," Freud had spoken of the ego's "perception that it has not come up to the demands made by its ideal, the superego." In the same paper he comments that "the superego, a substitute for the Oedipus complex, becomes a representative of the real external world as well and thus also becomes a model for the endeavours of the ego." It would appear that Freud here viewed the ego-ideal aspect of the superego in terms of the oedipal parents as *ideal figures* for the child. Thus the introjected parents who constitute the superego are regarded both as ideal models for the child and also as an internal

self-observing and critical agency. This formulation would correspond to that given in "On Narcissism" only if we assumed that the ideal which the child "projects before him . . . the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood . . ." is *identical* with the ideal parental figures which have been introjected as part of the process of resolving the oedipus complex. However, the term "ideal" in Freud's later formulations is presented quite unambiguously as referring to the parents *as models*, while in the 1914 presentation the term "ideal" is an ideal created by the child for himself, an ideal form of *himself*, representing a state which he strives to attain in an effort to regain the earliest condition of narcissistic perfection.<sup>1</sup>

We can conclude from the above discussion that Freud made use of the term "ego ideal" in a number of varying senses during the course of his writings from 1914 onward.

1. In "On Narcissism" (1914) and "*Introductory Lectures*" (1916-17) the term was used to refer to the individual's ideal for himself, constructed as a consequence of his efforts to regain infantile narcissism. It was here distinguished from the self-observing and critical agency, the conscience.

2. In *Group Psychology* (1921) the term was used to cover the two ideas which had been distinguished in the earlier phase. It now included what had been referred to as the conscience.

3. In "Remarks on the Theory and Practice of Dream Interpretation" (1923a) the term was used in the same sense as the "superego," as a mental structure. In *The Ego and the Id* (1923b), the two terms are indeed used synonymously.

4. In the *New Introductory Lectures* (1932) the superego is referred to as the "vehicle of the ego ideal." This usage was foreshadowed in 1924 in "The Economic Problem of Masochism" where Freud notes that "the ego reacts with feelings of anxiety . . . to the perception that it has not come up to the demands of its ideal, the

<sup>1</sup> This distinction is by no means merely an academic one. Attention has been drawn by various authors (e.g., A. Reich, 1954; Hartmann and Loewenstein, 1962) to the difference between idealization of the parents and early self-idealizations, but these authors stress the importance of the difference from the point of view of the genetic development of the ego ideal, whereas the view which we take is that the term "ego ideal" covers a number of aspects which should also be *functionally* differentiated at all ages.

superego." The use of the term "ideal" here refers to the ideal parents as embodied in the superego.<sup>2</sup>

### LATER WORK ON THE EGO IDEAL

Freud did not in his later work conceive of the ego ideal as distinct from the superego. From 1923 he used the two terms synonymously, and where he spoke of the ego ideal in relation to the superego it was in the sense of the superego's function of maintaining and enforcing standards on the ego. In a very recent paper on the superego, Hartmann and Loewenstein (1962) uphold this view, and speak of the "ego-ideal aspect" of the superego, regarding pre-oedipal self and object idealizations as precursors of this aspect of the superego system. This formulation of Hartmann and Loewenstein is a consistent and legitimate one, but it carries with it the possible disadvantage that because Freud's early concept of ego ideal includes something other than his later concept of superego, a very wide spectrum of functions has to be subsumed under the term "superego," with the consequence that such statements as "conflict with the superego," or "tension between ego and superego" may be theoretically and clinically imprecise unless carefully qualified.<sup>3</sup> As Novey (1955) remarks: "The concept of the superego has been considerably hampered by its unwieldy nature. Because of this there has gradually crept into the psychoanalytic literature a splitting of this concept into a superego and an ego ideal."

It is worth while examining briefly some of the ways in which this "splitting of the concept" has been formulated.

Jones (1935) speaks of the topographical prolongation of the ego ideal into the unconscious, and equates the unconscious part of it with the superego. He goes on: "The love component, so evident with the more conscious ego ideal, is with the unconscious superego quite subordinate to fear and severity."

<sup>2</sup> Freud may have been making the unspoken assumption here that the ego's ideal standards for itself (the 1914 meaning of "ego ideal") are identical with the inner representation of the ideal parents.

<sup>3</sup> It was the existence of problems of this sort, arising in the course of indexing clinical material in the Hampstead Index, that prompted the formulations of the Superego Group of the Hampstead Clinic (Sandler, 1960; Sandler et al., 1962) in which a distinction was made between the introjection of parental authority (resulting in the superego introjects) and various other ego mechanisms (such as identification).



A differentiation between superego and ego ideal, based on the antithesis between the two types of instincts, was proposed by Nunberg (1932), who said: "When instinct gratification is renounced out of fear of losing the love object, this object is absorbed by the ego and cathected with the libido; it becomes a part of the ego. In contrast to the ideal ego, it is called ego ideal. Out of love for this ideal, man clings to it and submits to its demands. Whereas the ego submits to the superego out of punishment, it submits to the ego ideal out of love." He goes on to refer to the ego ideal as "an image of the loved objects in the ego," in contrast to the superego which is "an image of the hated and feared objects." Nunberg relates this distinction to the shift in emphasis in Freud's writings from the libidinal to the more sadistic aspects of the ego ideal (superego), and comments that it is difficult in practice to separate these concepts sharply from each other.

Annie Reich (1954) distinguishes between the superego, "the later and more reality-syntonic structure," and the ego ideal, "the earlier, more narcissistic one." She sees the ego ideal as being based on "identifications with parental figures seen in a glorified light," while the superego represents the "identifications resulting from the breakdown of the oedipus complex." She further suggests that the "ego ideal expresses what one desires to be; the superego, what one ought to be."

In a more recent paper (1960) Annie Reich extended the idea of "primitive" and "archaic" ego ideals—primitive identifications with idealized infantile objects. She demonstrates the role of persistence of these early ego ideals in later pathology. What characterizes these early ego ideals is the feeling that the person is himself the admired, omnipotent, and idealized object. There is a magical fusion of self and object representations; he feels "as though he *were* his own ego ideal."

Jacobson (1954) regards the ego ideal "as part of the superego system, as a pilot and guide for the ego," but also sees its formation as a *precursor* to the establishment of the superego system proper. She refers to "processes [which] transform the magic images of the self and of the love objects into a unified ego ideal and, by internalization of the parental prohibitions and demands, establish super-

ego identifications and self-critical superego functions." She adds: "This double face of the ego ideal, which is forged from ideal concepts of the self and from idealized features of the love objects, gratifies indeed the infantile longing of which we said that it is never fully relinquished: the desire to be one with the love object."

Piers and Singer (1953) relate the experiencing of shame to tension between ego and ego ideal, and guilt to the outcome of tension between ego and superego.<sup>4</sup> These authors consider it to be immaterial whether one wishes to regard the ego ideal merely as one particular aspect of the superego, or as a psychological formation entirely separate and independent from the latter. The superego sets *boundaries* for the ego, the ego ideal *goals*. Piers and Singer see the ego ideal as possessing four major attributes. It contains a core of narcissistic omnipotence. It represents the sum of the positive identifications with the parental images. It contains layers of later identifications, more subject to change than the earlier ones. Finally, it contains the goals of the drive to mastery (Bühler's *Funktionslust*).

Novey (1955) suggests that the term "ego ideal" should not be used as a synonym for the loving or punishing superego, as the superego is based on the resolution of oedipal conflicts. He says: "The concept of the ego ideal is of use to define that particular segment of introjected objects whose functional operation has to do with proposed standards of thoughts, feeling, and conduct acquired later than the Oedipal superego, but having its roots in the early pregenital narcissistic operations against anxiety. This operative unit seems to play a separate role in character formation and functioning. It is clearly related to the superego but has different origins and a different function from it." Novey regards the ego ideal as being rooted in primitive parental identifications, but in the mature individual it is also dependent upon later significant persons. It is "a distinct psychic institution related to the ego and superego."

Recently Lampl-de Groot (1962) has proposed a clear differentiation between the ego ideal and the superego. The superego is considered to be equivalent to conscience, and is viewed as an essentially restricting and prohibiting agency. The ego ideal, on the contrary, has a different function, in that it is from early life a need-

<sup>4</sup> Cf. also Devereux (1950).

satisfying agency, and retains a degree of functional independence from the superego, although the two agencies normally work together harmoniously. The content of the ego ideal is "I am like my omnipotent parents," whereas the superego's content may be expressed as "I will live up to the demands of my parents."

Finally, Hartmann and Loewenstein (1962) link the ego-ideal aspect of the superego with positive aims, and contrast it with the moral restrictions and prohibitions which constitute another aspect. Although these are two sides to the superego, they are not always in harmony; yet in the developing normal individual they achieve a high degree of integration.

While the brief survey given above shows a number of alternative approaches to the problem of defining the ego ideal, there are certain common elements in all the approaches described. Perhaps the most striking is the recognition that Freud's later formulation of the ego ideal, in which it is equated with the structural superego, is insufficient to cover the phenomena to which the concept was earlier applied. In "On Narcissism" the ego ideal did not include the conscience, and its libidinal rather than its aggressive components were stressed. This situation has been dealt with by subsequent writers either by broadening the concept of the superego as presented in *The Ego and the Id*, or by retaining the latter concept and applying the term ego ideal to one or other elaboration of Freud's original ego-ideal concept.

There can be little doubt, on clinical and theoretical grounds, that some such step is necessary, and all the authors quoted earlier have made significant contributions in this area. However, it should be remembered that any new formulation of the ego ideal as distinct from the superego will not fully embrace all the meanings attributed to it by Freud at various times. Freud's 1914 ego ideal is different from his 1923 ego ideal, and even when the ego ideal is seen as an aspect of the superego system (e.g., Hartmann and Loewenstein, 1962) the resulting superego concept has had telescoped into it Freud's 1914 view of the ego ideal. In post-Freudian literature on the ego ideal, the term has been used either as a synonym for the structural superego or to refer to some development of the first formulations in "On Narcissism."

## THE EGO AND THE SELF

Part of the difficulty which has been experienced by many authors in regard to the concept of the ego ideal has arisen from the fact that Freud used the same term to denote both the *ego* and the *self*. James Strachey, in his editorial introductions to "On Narcissism" and *The Ego and the Id*, points out that the meaning which Freud attached to *das Ich* underwent a gradual modification. "At first," says Strachey, "he used the term without any great precision, as we might speak of 'the self.' " Strachey also points out, in his introduction to the later paper, that it "seems possible to detect two main uses: one in which the term distinguishes a person's self as a whole . . . from other people, and the other in which it denotes a particular part of the mind characterised by special attributes and functions." He adds: ". . . in some of his intervening works, particularly in connection with narcissism, the 'ego' seems to correspond rather to the 'self.' " In a footnote, Strachey remarks that in a few places in the *Standard Edition*, *das Ich* has been translated by "the self."

Hartmann (1956)<sup>5</sup> has suggested that, in the second decade of this century, the term "ego" as used by Freud became interchangeable with "one's own person" or the "self." He further remarks that this usage tends to obscure the fact that, particularly where the problem of narcissism is concerned, two quite different sets of propositions are involved. One refers to the functions and cathexes of the ego as a system (as distinct from the cathexes of different parts of the personality), the other to the opposition of the cathexis of one's own person to that of other persons (objects).

If we follow this formulation of Hartmann's, and distinguish between the ego and the self (self-representation and self-image), a distinction which is also maintained by others (e.g., Jacobson, 1954; Spiegel, 1959), then we can consider the term "ego ideal" to carry the following set of meanings in Freud's writings:

1. The superego in the sense of that specialized set of ego functions which we call the "conscience."

<sup>5</sup> Cf. also Hartmann (1950) and Edith Jacobson (1954).

2. Certain ego functions which were at one time considered to be functions of the superego (e.g., self-observing and defensive functions).

3. The ideal self-representation or ideal self-image.

4. Ideal parental introjects which serve as models for the self (the term "superego" has been used synonymously with "ego ideal" in this sense).

### THE EGO IDEAL AND THE REPRESENTATIONAL WORLD

It would appear from the preceding discussion that the term "ego ideal" can embrace a selection of rather different, though related elements, and that no precise agreement exists on what particular combination of elements should be referred to as the ego ideal. Freud and subsequent writers have all made use of the term to refer to various constellations within a larger system which includes functions and contents belonging to both the ego and the superego.

The lack of precise agreement in the literature has been reflected in the practical difficulties we have had in attempting to index clinical material derived from child analyses under the heading "ego ideal." In attempting to order our clinical observations on the conscious and unconscious ideals of children of different ages, we have been forced to the conclusion that these are for the most part so overdetermined that we could not differentiate an ego-ideal system or structure as functionally distinct from the ego and the superego. In Freud's later usage the ego ideal is identical with the superego; and in his own writings and in those of other psychoanalysts, the concept has included, as we have previously shown, both ideal object and ideal self-representations. A child's ideal object may be embodied in one or other aspect of his superego introjects, or in the inner representation of some external person. It may also contain elements derived from reaction formations to unwanted impulses of his own. We can frequently detect elements of the child's own self-representation or elements of his ideal self externalized or projected onto the object. The ideal self may in turn gain its content from a variety of sources, and need not be a mirror image of the ideal object or introject.

In our clinical work it is also necessary to take into account the fact that ideal self and object representations exist from early in life, well before the formation of the superego proper. A further difficulty in indexing has arisen from the fact that the content of the child's ideal self can vary from time to time, from one situation to another, although the ideals carried by the parental introjects remain relatively stable. It is well known, for example, how a gang leader or teen-age idols may replace the adolescent's parental introjects in determining the content of the ideal self (although parental ideals exert a profound and significant influence).

In our work with the analytic material of child patients in the Hampstead Index we have found it convenient to view the superego in terms of what has been called the *representational world* of the child (cf. Hartmann, 1950; Jacobson, 1953, 1954; Sandler, 1960, 1962). A fuller account of the concept of the representational world will be found elsewhere (Sandler and Rosenblatt, 1962). Briefly, it is the universe of representations,<sup>6</sup> of ideational and affective content, which the developing child constructs, on the basis of the sensory experiences arising from the drives and from the interaction between his own body and the outside world. At first it is extremely rudimentary, and the representations which are constructed by the developing ego are linked with experiences of need satisfaction, but later the child creates representations of many other things, activities, feelings, and relationships. He differentiates a self-representation from object representations, and learns to distinguish between "inner" and "outer" experiences. As time goes on, certain representations (linked with unwanted instinctual wishes) are repressed, and remain unconscious, while other aspects are permitted access to consciousness and motility. A specialized part of the representational world consists of words and symbols and provides the furniture for the ego activity of thinking. The representational world is not at all synonymous with the ego, although it is one of the functions of the ego to create and organize the representational world.

Relevant to the present discussion is the idea of the *shape* of a representation of self or object—the particular form or character

<sup>6</sup> The term "representation" covers, for the time being, both the organized and enduring "schema" (cf. Sandler, 1962), which is always unconscious, and the various images (conscious and unconscious) which arise on the basis of the schema.

assumed by that representation at any given moment, determined by the pressures of the id, the requirements of the external world, and the standards and demands of the introjects. Introjection in this context is the elevation of the parental representations (or aspects of these) to special status. It occurs when the child acts in the absence of a parental authority figure as if the parent were actually present. It is the investment of object representations with an authority or status which they did not previously possess. The relationship of this type of introjection, associated with the resolution of the oedipus complex, to superego formation has been discussed in detail elsewhere (Sandler, 1960). Introjection can take place without resulting in identification.

Identification, as distinct from introjection, can be defined as the changing of the shape of one's self-representation on the basis of another representation as a model. Identification is not bound to introjection, and in its most primitive form represents a fusion, in whole or in part, of self- and object representations. Later, it can take place as a conscious or unconscious copying of aspects of the "shape" of an object representation, and duplicating it in the self-representation, with the distinction between self- and object representations being maintained.

Identifications of one sort or another take place early in life, but the analysis of pregenital identifications forms an important part of analytic work with both children and adults. After the formation of the superego through the introjection of parental authority, there can occur identification with features of the introjects as well as with aspects of nonintrojected objects. The capacity to identify with objects (via object representations) continues through life, irrespective of whether these objects are persons in the subject's environment or introjects.

The self-representation is built up on the basis of the child's experiences of his own body through its interaction with the external world, and through identifications with his objects.<sup>7</sup> One of the shapes which the self-representation can assume is that which we can call the *ideal self*, i.e., that which, at any moment, is a desired shape

<sup>7</sup> The object representation includes all the distortions through projection, etc., which the child has made during the course of his development.

of the self—the “self-I-want-to-be.” This is that shape of the self which, at that time, in those circumstances, and under the influence of the particular instinctual impulse of the moment, is the shape which would yield the greatest degree of well-being for the child. It is the shape which would provide the highest degree of narcissistic gratification and would minimize the quantity of aggressive discharge on the self.<sup>8</sup>

The ideal self at any moment is not necessarily simply that shape of the self which represents instinctual impulses as being fulfilled<sup>9</sup> but will be determined as well by the child's need to gain the love and approval of his parents or introjects, or to avoid their disapproval. In this sense the ideal self is at any moment a compromise formation, a compromise between the desired state of instinctual gratification and the need to win the love of, or to avoid punishment from, authority figures, internal or external. The ultimate criterion at any given time is an economic one. If the threat of punishment or of loss of love is greater than the libidinal or aggressive gains obtained through direct wish fulfillment, then the child will abandon his wish-fulfilling ideal in favor of one which is more acceptable to his objects, internal or external. It is clear, however, that in any given situation there might be a conflict of choice between various shapes of the ideal self.

The special economic gain obtained through constructing the ideal self on the basis of *identification* deserves mention. If the parental injunction is “behave as I do,” then the formation of an ideal self which is modeled on the object provides a double gain. In the first place it represents compliance with the wishes of authority and the child gains a feeling of being loved; in the second place, the child feels identified with his admired object, and can love and admire himself as he does the object.

We are now in a position to distinguish between several types of ideals, all of which have been included by Freud and other writers

<sup>8</sup> While this paper is primarily concerned with the elaboration of the concept of the ideal self, it is of some interest to note that in different situations the *ideal object*, the wished-for object, may also change. We can also speak of an *ideal relationship* at any particular time, the “relationship-I-would-now-like-to-exist.”

<sup>9</sup> From a genetic point of view the earliest shape of the ideal self is probably a wish-fulfilling one exclusively. The consideration of the genetic development of the ideal self does not form part of this paper.



in the concept of "ego ideal." The first we can refer to as the "ideal object," where the child possesses an admired, idealized, and omnipotent object. The second represents those ideals which are held up to the child by his parents or introjects in the form of the ideal ("good," "well-behaved") child. This ideal, conveyed to the child by his parents, need not be identical with the ideals or behavior of the parents themselves. It represents the parents' ideal of a desirable and loved child, as perceived by the child. The child may be aware of these parental ideals, yet they need not have been integrated into the content of the child's self or ideal self. Whether they are or not depends on the child's ego development and on the economic loss or gain involved. Both these types of ideal appear to be included in the sense in which Freud spoke of the superego as the vehicle (*Träger*) of the ego ideal (1932).

Finally, we have the set of ideals which constitutes the content of the ideal self, and this is the sense in which Freud spoke of the ego ideal in his first formulation, in the paper "On Narcissism" (1914), and even in *Group Psychology* (1921), although in the latter paper he had, in contrast to his 1914 formulation, included the "conscience" in the ego ideal.

Clearly the content of the ideal self on the one hand, and that of the ideal object or ideal child (as transmitted by the object) on the other, need not necessarily be the same, though they are often closely related. The child has a strong motive for identifying in his ideal self with the idealized features of his authority figure, whether real person or introject, for by identification he can transfer some of the libidinal cathexis attached to the object to the ideal self. Object love is transformed into secondary narcissism, with resulting potential increase in well-being and self-esteem. By identifying in his ideal self with the "good" child image of his parents or introjects, he can feel loved and admired by them.

The ideal self is far more fluid and flexible than the ideals held up to the child by his introjects, although it will contain a solid core of identifications with the admired parents of his earliest years. In the well-adapted individual the content of the ideal self will undergo continuous modification in the light of the person's experiences of reality. In states of regression, the content of the ideal self

will approximate more closely to aspects of the idealized pregenital objects.

In normal development parental ideals, which have previously been taken over will be modified and displaced in a reality-syntonic fashion and will be integrated with the ideals taken over from other figures throughout life—such figures as friends, teachers, and colleagues; indeed, from any admired object. Ideals may also be derived from feared objects, through a mechanism similar to “identification with the aggressor.”

The sources of the content of the ideal self can be categorized as follows:

1. Identification with aspects of loved, admired, or feared objects. These objects may be introjects (after the formation of the superego proper), or may be at any time persons in the individual's environment.

2. Identification with the image of the “good” or “desirable” child as conveyed by the objects.

3. Identification with previous shapes of the individual's own self. By this is meant the construction of ideals based upon the wish to attain “ideal” states previously experienced in reality or in fantasy.<sup>10</sup>

To these sources we should perhaps add the influence of the individual's reality knowledge. The capacity to take reality into account in the construction of the ideal self of the moment is a most important one from the point of view of development and adaptation. Reality knowledge here includes knowledge of one's own potentialities and limitations as well as knowledge of the environment.

At any one moment and in any situation the ideal self will be a resultant of the operation of all the factors mentioned. It will contain temporary and *ad hoc* elements to varying degree, but will also contain a more stable core, for the most part unconscious, based upon the ideals created in childhood. In particular, the ideals based on and maintained by the relationship to the introjects will play an important part in normal and pathological mental life. Conflict of choice between various shapes of the ideal self, especially between

<sup>10</sup> The topic of regression in relation to the ideal self is relevant here, but will form the subject of another study.

those derived at various stages of development, will also play a significant role in determining pathology.

When we have spoken in the preceding passages of the formation of the ideal self we have been guilty of an oversimplification. The formation of the ideal self has been described as if in fact the individual is easily capable of changing the shape of his self-representation to conform to his ideal, but we know from clinical experience that this is often far from being the case. To the picture presented above, we have to apply the same modification as was made by Freud in the theory of dreams, when he amended his statement that the dream was a wish fulfillment, to the view that it was an *attempted* wish fulfillment. In the same way the construction of an ideal self, and the efforts to attain it, constitute an attempt to restore, sometimes in a most roundabout way, the primary narcissistic state of the earliest weeks of life. But the effort to attain the ideal self is not always successful. If the individual cannot change the shape of his self so as to identify it with his ideal self, then he will suffer the pangs of disappointment, and the affective states associated with lowered self-esteem. As Edith Jacobson (1954) has pointed out, self-esteem is a function of the discrepancy between the self-representation and the wishful concept of the self, which we refer to here as the ideal self. This is also the basic assumption made by Annie Reich in her paper on "Pathologic Forms of Self-Esteem Regulation" (1960), which covers and applies clinically a number of the ideas presented here.

The establishment of an ideal self within the representational world of the child provides him with a potential source of well-being. Some of the libido attached to the objects can now be transferred to the ideal and the child can become more independent of the love, praise, and encouragement of his objects, attempting to avoid disappointment and frustration by living up to his ideal self ("identification with the ideal self").<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> It is of some interest that there are ways in which the ideal self can be "gained" other than by identification. In a form of "narcissistic object choice," parts of the ideal self are externalized (projected) onto an object, which then becomes the vehicle of desired aspects of the self (rather than "idealized parts of the self"). By forming a relationship with the object, the externalized parts of the ideal self are regained through a love which results in narcissistic gratification through a concealed union with the ideal self. Probably such a mechanism enters very frequently into object

We would stress that the system of ideal selves (like the representational world in general) has elements in all three of the systems *Ucs.*, *Pcs.*, and *Pcpt-Cs.* As the child develops, the various shapes of his ideal self become modified and supplemented. Some aspects will be defended against, and may reappear in modified form. Regression to earlier forms of the ideal self may show itself in a number of clinically important states, and in the severest form of regression we can see a state of magical omnipotence in which self, ideal self, and ideal object are fused into one.

Finally, a short comment on shame and guilt might be in place. A number of authors (e.g., Piers and Singer, 1953), have related shame to tension between the ego and the ego ideal, and guilt to tension between ego and superego. In the present frame of reference it is possible to suggest, more specifically, that the affect of shame arises when the individual perceives himself (or believes himself to have been perceived by others) as having failed to live up to ideal standards which he accepts, whereas guilt is experienced when his ideal self differs from that which he feels to be dictated by his introjects. Shame might be related to "I cannot see myself as I want to see myself or as I want others to see me." Guilt, on the other hand, would be associated with "I do not really want to be what I feel I ought to be." This distinction is of clinical significance in relation to the formulation of appropriately worded interpretations and the aim to which they are directed.

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relationships, for we need only think of the way in which a woman may gain the penis, which forms part of her ideal self, through a love relationship with a man.

If the object which acts as a vehicle for the ideal self in reality differs markedly from the ideal, then what might be called an illusional or even delusional relationship ensues.

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